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8

Taking Advantage of Read-Alouds to Help Children Make Sense of Decontextualized Language

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Reading aloud to children has been a commonplace activity in homes and schools for centuries, and there are indications that its effects are significant for children's literacy growth (Durkin, 1974–1975; Feitelson, Goldstein, Iraqi, & Share, 1993; Mason & Allen, 1986). Recently, researchers have suggested that the most important benefit read-alouds give to children is experience with decontextualized language, making sense of ideas that are about something beyond the here and now (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Heath, 1983; Snow, 1993; Snow & Dickinson, 1991; Snow et al., 1995). By the time children enter school, they are quite capable of talking about the world around them, a world they can see and point to. However, such contextualized experiences are quite different from ideas built only through words read from a book. But building ideas from words alone—decontextualized language—is essential to comprehending and learning from text.

WHAT'S THE KEY TO READING ALOUD?

The value of experience with decontextualized language to future literacy seems to derive not from merely listening to literary language, but from talking about the ideas. Cochran-Smith, Heath, and Snow and her colleagues all highlight the talk that surrounds book reading as a key contributor to becoming literate. Participation in decontextualized language, the formation of ideas about what was in a book, and their expression in ways that make sense to others are all ingredients of communication competence. Snow (1993) points out that quality talk around books can promote "[familiarity with] relatively rare vocabulary, understanding the lexical and grammatical strategies for adjusting to a nonpresent audience, identifying the perspective of the listener so as to provide sufficient background information, and knowing the genre-specific rules for various forms of talk such as narrative and explanation" (p. 15).

Snow et al. (1995) and Dickinson and Tabors (1991) have found evidence that preschool children's participation in talk around book reading enhances the growth of their literacy skills. Further evidence supporting this claim comes from studies by Morrow (1992) and Freppon (1991), in which the researchers concluded that "talk surrounding the text" (Morrow, p. 253), or "getting children to think about what was going on in the story" (Freppon, p. 144) was key to literacy growth.

FINDINGS ON READING ALOUD IN CLASSROOMS

Researchers who have explored teachers' read-aloud interactions in classrooms have noted a variety of styles, each of which has different effects on children's understanding. Dickinson and Smith's (1994) fine-grained examination of reading aloud in preschool classrooms revealed that certain features were particularly effective. Specifically, they found that the interactions that occurred as the story was read; that involved both children and teachers; and that were analytic in nature led to positive effects on kindergartners' vocabulary and story comprehension. Talk that was "analytic in nature" required children to reflect on the story content or language.

Teale and Martinez (1996) described the read-aloud styles of six teachers, each of whom had a distinct approach to the text content and the kind of interactions she encouraged. One teacher's style led to better story retelling by the children. This teacher's read-aloud style was characterized by attention to important story information before, during, and after the reading, and by her efforts to elicit responses from the children about the story episodes.

Teale and Martinez went on to point out stylistic features that may interfere with comprehension. Chiefly, these include less effective ways of dealing with children's responses, such as allowing children to stray well beyond the story line, or circumscribing the situation to allow only brief, literal responses, with the teacher quickly supplying answers when the children hesitate. Teale and Martinez suggest that the most effective way to encourage children's responses is to focus on important story ideas and allow the children to reflect, rather than expecting a quickly retrieved answer. Thus Teale and Martinez's ideas about the most effective read-aloud strategies seem quite consistent with Dickinson and Smith's. Yet it is clear from these investigations that the most effective read-aloud strategies are far from the most common ones, and that read-aloud experiences are not being effectively used to build children's language abilities.

MOTIVATION FOR TEXT TALK

In developing our own perspective on reading aloud as a means to promote young children's language abilities, we began by observing teachers reading to their kindergarten and first-grade children. We conducted observations of four teachers—two kindergarten and two first grade—in two different schools. We observed the teachers between two and four times each. Our observations confirmed the literature's finding that the most effective strategies are not being used as widely as they should be. In particular, we noted few instances in which children were encouraged to make sense of decontextualized language. That is, children were not prompted to think through ideas, connect them, and express their developing understanding of the story. Instead, interactions tended to focus on the most concrete and obvious story information. Questions typically asked for descriptive information: "Where did he go?" "What did she have on her head?" "What did he find on the sidewalk?" All of these prompts could be answered in a word or two with information retrieved directly from the story.

Given the contrast between our knowledge of effective practices and the rarity of their use in classrooms, we initiated a project called Text Talk, in which we sought to develop an approach based on the most effective strategies and then implement this approach in classrooms. Key to this effort was the goal of increasing children's opportunities to respond to decontextualized language in meaningful ways.

TEXT TALK DEVELOPMENT

Text Talk was developed by selecting books for kindergarten and first grade, and then creating and piloting a format for interactions during story

read-alouds. We selected books that we judged would provide challenging content and meaningful experiences with decontextualized language.

The types of interactions we developed for the books were adopted from our earlier work on Questioning the Author, an approach to text-based instruction that we had developed around the principle of "teaching for understanding" (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997; Beck, McKeown, Worthy, Sandora, & Kucan, 1996; McKeown & Beck, 1998). Questioning the Author has been used with students from third grade through high school. Although Questioning the Author served as a starting point, it was originally developed for older students reading school texts, while Text Talk was aimed at younger children in a read-aloud situation.

The Text Talk format included an introduction to the story, interspersed open questions, follow-up questions, a story wrap-up, and vocabulary activities. We discuss each of these components in turn.

Introducing the Story

In Text Talk, the story is introduced briefly. This brief introduction is dramatically different from what we saw in our storytime classroom observations. Indeed, we were struck by how much time teachers spent on establishing background knowledge before reading a story, and on encouraging children to relate their experiences, no matter how tangential, to the story. It appeared that research showing the importance of background knowledge to comprehension had been elaborated in practice to a point at which the development of background knowledge had taken on a life of its own.

In analyzing how stories were introduced we observed several problematic tendencies. The most common of these was the discussion of ideas with limited relevance to the story. As an example, consider our observations of a teacher introducing the story *Brave Irene* (Steig, 1986) to a first-grade class. *Brave Irene* is about a little girl who plods through a blizzard to deliver a ball gown that her mother, a dressmaker, has made for the duchess. In addition to discussing the concept of bravery, the teacher introduced the term *dressmaker*, and offered a long explanation of how clothing used to be made, and how it is made today. Among the topics discussed was the idea that most of our clothing today is made by machines, in factories. Yet the only information that children needed to know about dressmakers in order to understand the story was that a dressmaker is someone who makes dresses. Digressions like these can distract children's attention. In fact, there is evidence that children may have difficulty separating story ideas from up-front talk of this sort (Neuman, 1990; Nicholson & Imlach, 1981).

A second common feature that we observed was the early introduction of information that wouldn't be encountered until well into the story. The problem is that such information may not be remembered when it is finally needed. For instance, about a third of the way into *Make Way for Ducklings* (McCloskey, 1941), Mr. and Mrs. Mallard molt. Certainly, the word *molt* is likely to be unfamiliar to young children. An explanation is clearly required, because molting prevents the ducks from flying, and knowing that they can't fly is important to understanding their later actions. However, rather than explaining *molt* before beginning the story, it would seem most effective to provide a parenthetical explanation at the point in the story when it is actually needed.

A third frequently observed feature of introductions to read-alouds was teachers' disclosure of events in the story. Knowing the plot details beforehand precludes children's need to attend to the story as it is read, and seriously diminishes the number of opportunities for them to develop ideas from decontextualized language.

Interspersed Open Questions

Text Talk questions are intended to encourage children to talk about the important ideas in a story as they occur. Open-ended questions are interspersed with story reading in order to encourage children to express and connect story ideas. This is in contrast to the kinds of closed questions that we observed, which asked children to simply retrieve small bits of text language.

As an example, compare the two sets of questions and responses in Table 8.1. The top set was collected from classrooms before implementation of Text Talk, while the bottom set came from interactions during implementation. As the table suggests, Text Talk questions resulted in more connected and elaborated responses. Although the open questions did move children's responses in the right direction, something more than open questions is required in order to prompt children to respond thoughtfully to text. To be effective, teachers often need to follow up students' responses. (We will address the matter of follow-up responses in a later section.)

Wrapping Up

As is the case with any lesson, a read-aloud experience needs to have a wrap-up. It is not enough to simply finish the story; a coda is required. In Text Talk we wrap up by asking children to think about some aspect of the story—perhaps a character or an idea. For example, after readings of *The Giant Jam Sandwich*

TABLE 8.1
Comparison of Closed and Open Questions and Answers

Baseline Classroom	
Questions	*Responses*
Is he a new toy or an old toy?	Old.
Who is Joe? He's the what?	The baby.
Think back in the story. They went to pick up his ...	Big sister.
Do you think Nelle is going to be happy or mad?	Mad.
Somebody else had already what?	Found him.
Was she being nice to her little brother?	Yeah.
Text Talk Classroom	
Questions	*Responses*
How did the other kids like Stephanie's ponytail?	First they liked it when she didn't have it to her ear, and then they kept calling her ugly, and now they're gonna be jealous, real jealous.
What's going on?	George got into trouble anyway.
What's the problem with having a fawn as a pet?	Cause he'll eat everything. He's like a goat.
Charlie looked at the girls and purred. What's that tell us?	The girls are happy that they might have found him.
Why would termites be a worry for the owl?	Because the termites might eat the owl's home cause it's made out of wood.
What happened?	The people saw the signmaker and chased him into the woods and they thought that the signmaker did it, but the boy did.

(Lord, 1972), in which townspeople create a giant jam sandwich to trap the wasps that are menacing their village, the wrap-up asks children to talk about what the people in the town had to do to make their plan work. In the case of *Beware of the Bears* (MacDonald, 1998)—a sequel to the Goldilocks story in which the bears take revenge on Goldilocks by making a mess of her house—the wrap-up asks students to say what they think about what the bears did, and to explain why they came to such conclusions.

Vocabulary

Given the importance of vocabulary to comprehension, and the enormous discrepancy that exists in vocabulary size between high- and low-achieving learners (Graves, Brunetti, & Slater, 1982; Seashore & Eckerson, 1940), attention to vocabulary acquisition is essential. In Text Talk we take advantage of the interesting and sophisticated words that good writers use to tell their stories. In addition to explaining words needed for comprehension as they occur, we systematically focus on several words from each story in activities that take place after the story is read. We chose words that we thought would be unfamiliar to children but useful for their vocabulary repertoires. This is the type of words previously labeled as "Tier Two": that is, words that are frequently used by mature language users and that are of general utility, neither limited to a specific domain (e.g., *sonata, nebula, ambergris*) nor found in a basic oral vocabulary (e.g., *mother, house, walk*) (Beck, McKeown, & Omanson, 1987). Examples of Tier Two words include *unique, convenient, retort, influence, ponder,* and *procrastinate*.

The typical Text Talk vocabulary activity begins with a description of how a particular word was used in the story. The word's meaning is explained and a typical use is presented. This is followed by an elicitation of children's responses to the word's meaning—for example, asking children to judge the word's uses or create their own. The following activity is provided for the word *absurd,* after a reading of *Burnt Toast on Davenport Street* (Egan, 1997):

> *absurd:* In the story, when the fly told Arthur he could have three wishes if he didn't kill him, Arthur said he thought that was absurd. That means Arthur thought it was silly to believe a fly could grant wishes. When something is absurd—it is ridiculous and hard to believe.
>
> If I told you that your teacher was going to stand on his/her head to teach you—that would be absurd. If someone told you that dogs could fly—that would be absurd.
>
> I'll say some things, and if you think they are absurd, say: "That's absurd!" If you think they are not absurd, say: "That makes sense."
>
> I have a singing cow for a pet. (absurd)
>
> I saw a tall building that was made of green cheese. (absurd)
>
> Last night I watched a movie on TV. (makes sense)
>
> This morning I saw some birds flying around the sky. (makes sense)
>
> If I said "let's fly to the moon this afternoon," that would be absurd. Who can think of an absurd idea? (When a child answers, ask another if they think that was absurd, and if so, to tell the first child: "That's absurd!")

To sum up, the Text Talk format takes students from story introduction through wrap-up and subsequent vocabulary activities. The approach also focuses on interspersing questions throughout the reading, in order to initiate discussion of important story ideas.

PROCESSES AND RESULTS OF TEXT TALK IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing Text Talk in Classrooms

After developing Text Talk, we implemented the approach in two kindergarten and two first-grade classrooms in an urban elementary school. The children are all African American, and the majority of them are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The school district within which the school is located is among a handful that have been designated for state takeover if achievement is not improved in the near future.

The teachers had taught at the school for at least 2 years, and three of the four had more than 8 years of teaching experience. Two of the teachers were African American and two were European American.

We introduced Text Talk through a workshop that explained the approach and the motivations for its development. We then provided the teachers with books, accompanied by questions to frame the text interactions, and vocabulary activities. We worked closely with all four teachers during the year to modify and augment their interactions as issues arose. This meant that we observed each teacher once a week and provided feedback, and met with the group of teachers every 2 weeks. The focus of these meetings was how to help children develop and express their ideas about the story. Children's responses to the initial questions asked during a story reading were very limited, especially at first. The teacher's task was to help the children focus and elaborate their ideas into a full response, without providing so much information that the teacher took over responsibility for answering.

Text Talk asks teachers to carry on an interactive and coherent discussion with 5- and 6-year-olds about decontextualized ideas. This is a difficult task. Even though the teachers were provided with questions to begin their discussions, they still had to work hard to instigate discussions that helped their students build meaning.

Follow-Up Questions

The most difficult aspect of a teacher's job is supporting the development of children's initial responses to open questions into coherent, complete, and connected expressions of ideas. Indeed, probably about 60% of our meetings with the teachers were devoted to working on how to effectively follow up children's initial responses. In the course of our work we identified several types of responses that called for follow-up.

In our early observations, we noted the teachers' tendency to follow up by asking generic questions such as "What else?" or "Who has something to add?" The problem with such generic questions is that they do not clearly connect to the ideas that have been activated. Thus, "What else?" tends to elicit a list of unconnected responses, and "Who has something to add?" can result in students bringing in unrelated information. Such generic follow-ups simply do not promote coherent representation of the text. And coherent representation is necessary if discussion is to scaffold the development of children's comprehension ability.

In an effort to stimulate more productive follow-ups, we encouraged the teachers to look at what the child was doing in his or her response, and use that as a starting point for a follow-up question. In the examples that follow we present children's initial responses and then discuss the effective follow-ups that were developed.

Incomplete Responses. Perhaps the most common problem was incomplete initial responses. For example, in the story *Six-Dinner Sid* (Moore, 1991), a vet figures out that Sid, a cat, has been getting dinner at six houses, because each person believes they are Sid's owner. At the point in the story where the vet realizes this and begins to call the various owners, the teacher asked, "What's happening?" The question was meant to elicit children's descriptions of the vet's realization. However, the first response, "The vet is calling the owners," merely described the action of making phone calls. Notice the teacher's followup and the child's response to it:

T: He's calling the owners? What's that all about?
S: There were owners in his book and there were six and all one cat.

What makes this follow-up useful is that it calls on the students to reflect on the response and consider what calling the owners had to do with what was going on in the story. That is, the original response merely described an action that had no explicit connection to the development of the plot (i.e., that Sid's been found out).

Repeating the Text. Another type of frequent response contained words directly from the text. *The Wolf's Chicken Stew* (Kasza, 1987) is a story in which a

wolf anonymously sends food to a chicken and her family in order to fatten them up for his dinner. At the point in the story when the chicken discovers that the wolf has been sending the food, the teacher asked, "What just happened?" After the child responded with words from the text, the teacher followed up by asking what the words meant, as a way to prompt the child to go further:

S: The chicken opened up the door and she said, "Oh, it's you, Mr. Wolf."
T: What did the chicken mean when she said, "Oh, it was you, Mr. Wolf?"
S: Because the chicken knew he was sending the food.

Focusing on the Wrong Things. A third common situation occurred when the children focused on unimportant information. The following exchange occurred during a reading of *Curious George Plays Baseball* (Rey & Rey, 1986), after the following lines of text: "George sneaked over to the dugout. The balls and bats used for practice were lying on the ground."

T: Why did he sneak over to the dugout?
S: So he could practice.
T: Why would he sneak? Why didn't he just walk over to the dugout? Why did he sneak?
S: So nobody would see him.
T: So that no one would see him?
S: So he wouldn't get into trouble.

The focus of the questioning was George's sneaking away to avoid getting into trouble by being somewhere that he shouldn't have been. After the child's initial response, which concentrated just on George's moving over to the dugout, the teacher followed up by explicitly focusing on the word *sneak*.

Table 8.2 lists the stems of follow-up questions that seemed to effectively encourage children to elaborate their responses, while keeping focused on the ideas being developed. The ellipses stand for wording from the student's initial response that the teacher would then draw into her follow-up question. Such follow-ups signal children to more fully explain the thinking behind their initial response.

Results of Text Talk Implementation

The goal of our research on Text Talk was to investigate three issues. The first of these was the extent to which Text Talk influenced classroom discourse during read-alouds. The second was the extent to which teachers used Text Talk principles on their own when reading aloud to their classes. The third was the program's effect on student comprehension and vocabulary. In this chapter we have reported findings about the first issue (the influence of Text Talk on classroom discourse). We are still collecting data about the second and third. At this point we can only report anecdotally: Teachers have told us that they use the Text Talk orientation during other read-aloud opportunities. We turn now to reporting our findings on the issue of classroom discourse.

TABLE 8.2
Ideas for Following Up Student Responses

What does that mean ...
What's that tell you, if ...
... what's that about?
Think about what we already know about ...
Why does the story say ...?
What does that tell us about ...?
So we know ..., but why does it say ...?

To obtain a baseline of the teachers' reading-aloud interactions, each of the four teachers was tape-recorded reading a story to her class before the implementation of Text Talk. Each teacher then conducted about 25 lessons over the course of the year. All of the Text Talk lessons were recorded and transcribed.

To gauge the effects of Text Talk on classroom discourse, we compared the teachers' baseline read-aloud discussions with four of their Text Talk lessons. We then examined the nature of their questions and the relationship of types of questions to children's responses.

The analysis of questions looked first at questions that initiated discussion, categorizing them as open or closed. Open questions invite students to produce a response: Although the question is asked in anticipation that the response will include certain ideas, both the form and the content of response are left up to the child. Examples of open questions are found in the bottom half of Table 8.1. Closed questions, on the other hand, circumscribe the response and are answerable in just one or two words that are directly retrievable from the text. Examples of closed questions are found in the top half of Table 8.1.

We also examined teachers' follow-up questions after a student's initial response. As illustrated in the preceding examples, follow-up questions were re-

TABLE 8.3
Examples of Open and Closed Follow-Up Questions

Open Follow-Up Questions
S: Because the owl can't do nothing to him.
T: Why can't he do anything to him?
S: Everybody's starting to think of ideas.
T: OK, they're starting to think of ideas. Just any ideas?
S: If somebody gets too close he's going to throw milk at them.
T: OK, he was going to throw milk. So what does that tell us about the people of Chestnut Cove?
Closed Follow-Up Questions
S: He was walking backwards and bumped into somebody.
T: He's walking backwards. Is that the normal way to walk?
S: He wasn't really in Alaska.
T: He wasn't really in Alaska, he was just doing what?
S: He wants a pet.
T: He wants a pet, because does he have any friends to play with?
S: They feed [the cat] too much food.
T: Are they feeding him because they like him or because they don't like him?

lated to the initial question, and typically aimed for completion, elaboration, or clarification of initial responses. These questions were also scored as open or closed. Table 8.3 provides examples of open and closed follow-up questions. The student response that preceded the follow-up question is included in order to more clearly demonstrate the question's intent.

Figure 8.1 represents the percentages of open initial and open follow-up questions in baseline and Text Talk classes. As the figure shows, there was a dramatic difference in the proportion of open questions, both initial and follow-up, used in baseline and Text Talk lessons. Specifically, in baseline lessons over 80% of the initial questions were closed, while in the Text Talk lessons the proportions were reversed: over 80% of the questions were open. There was also a less dramatic difference in the proportion of open and closed follow-up questions. This clearly shows that open questions typified Text

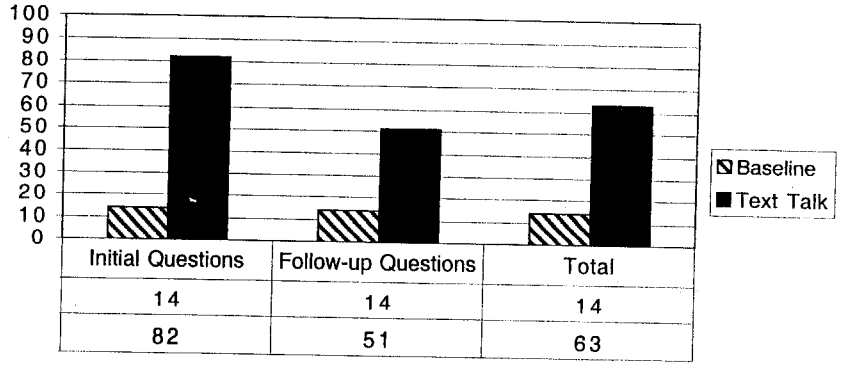

FIG. 8.1. Percentage of open initial and follow-up questions in baseline and Text Talk lessons.

Talk discourse, whereas closed questions had been more typical prior to Text Talk's implementation.

In addition to looking at types of teacher questions, we also examined the amount of student talk. Measuring how much children are saying helps to indicate the extent to which they are producing language and contributing ideas. To make this measurement, we calculated the number of words per student response in the baseline and Text Talk lessons. The result showed that the length of responses across all four classrooms increased from 2.1 words per response in the baseline lessons to 7.65 words per response in the Text Talk lessons.

To get a more fine-grained understanding of how the length of student responses was influenced by open questions (which are the central feature of the Text Talk discourse environment), we examined the length of student responses in each classroom in conjunction with the percentage of open questions in each classroom.

The top portion of Fig. 8.2 shows the number of words per response for each classroom during the baseline lesson, and the mean number of words per response across the four Text Talk lessons. The bottom portion shows the percent of open questions for baseline and Text Talk lessons in each classroom. As can be seen from the figure, the length of response varies with the proportion of open questions.

Finally, we explored how directly the open or closed nature of questions influenced the nature of students' responses. Specifically, we were interested in investigating the extent to which children treat open questions as invitations to produce ideas—as suggested in the bottom set of responses in Table 8.1. To do so, we analyzed the data for matches between question and response. Children's

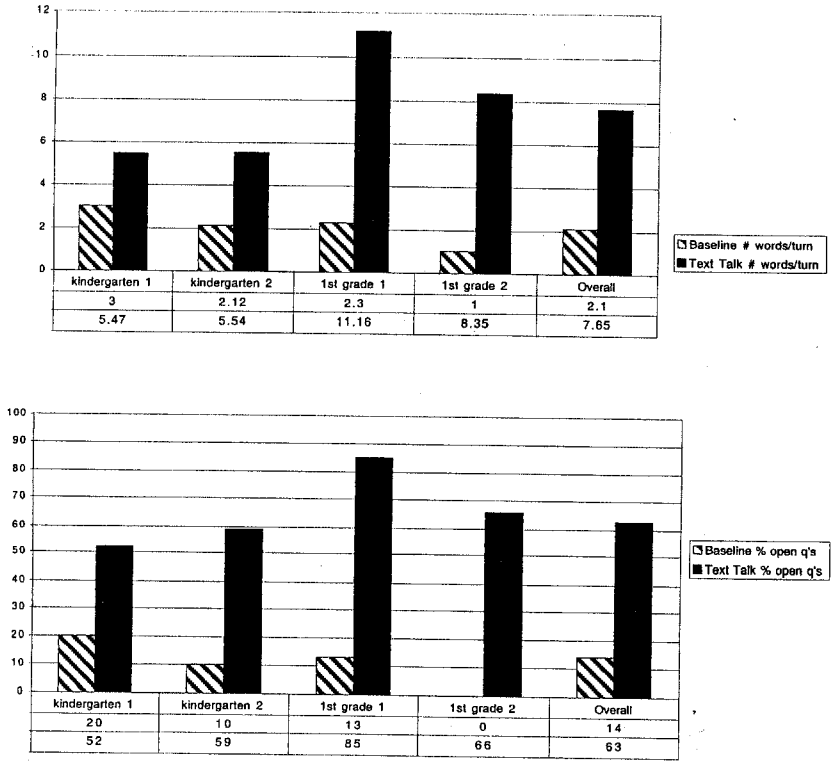

FIG. 8.2. Words per student turn (top panel) and percentage of open questions in baseline and Text Talk lessons in each classroom.

responses were coded as matching if the response to an open question was open, or if the response to a closed question was closed. Responses were scored as open if the children had constructed the responses themselves, rather than relying on the text or the question. Responses were scored as closed if they were directly retrieved from text or literally and simply followed the form of the question, such as responding to "How is George feeling?" with "He's feeling bad."

Responses were considered non-matching when students answered a closed question as if it had asked for a constructed response, or answered an open question as if it had asked for a retrieved or single-word response. One example would be a student answering the closed question "Is he a new toy or an old toy?" with the open response "That's his oldest toy cause he had that toy ever since he was a baby"; another example would entail answering the open question "How did the other kids like Stephanie's ponytail?" with the closed response "Ugly."

The match between the nature of the question and the nature of the response is shown in Fig. 8.3. The numbers in the figure are averaged across all four classrooms. As can be seen, the nature of the question strongly influences the nature of the response in both baseline and Text Talk lessons. In baseline lessons, virtually all of the responses matched the questions, and in Text Talk a large majority (83.5 %) matched.

It is of some interest to consider why non-matches occur in Text Talk lessons approximately 16% of the time, while being virtually absent from baseline lessons. First of all, open responses are more difficult for children to produce, so it seems understandable that the children might have been unable to do so at times, and instead responded to Text Talk's open questions in a closed manner. More interesting is the question of why children just as often make the opposite non-match—that is, providing open responses to closed questions. It seems that, in Text Talk, children become accustomed to constructing their responses openly, and sometimes do so even if the question does not explicitly require it.

Our results suggest, first, that teachers were able to change their read-aloud style to an approach based on interspersed open questions and follow-up scaffolding. Second, children responded to this read-aloud approach by producing language and expressing ideas about the stories they had heard (rather than simply parroting the text). Thus, our work with Text Talk supports the premise that increased interactions with decontextualized language benefit children's language and comprehension ability.

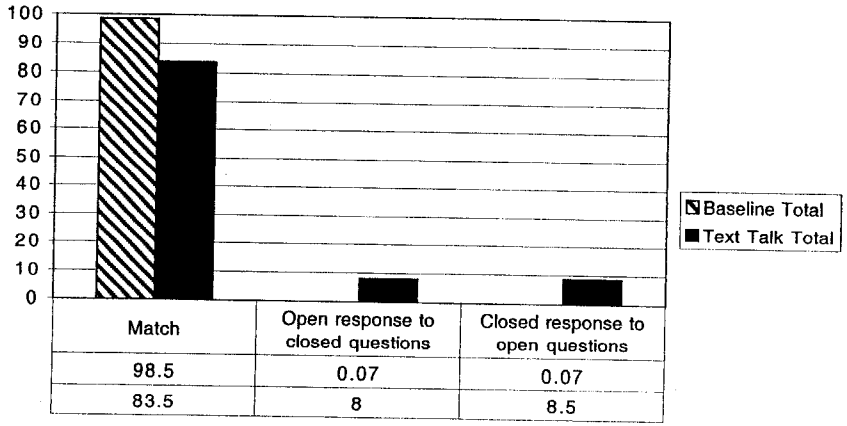

FIG. 8.3. Percentage of match between question and response for baseline and Text Talk lessons.

CONCLUSION

The results of Text Talk show that young children will pick up on the invitation to respond to text in a constructed fashion. Customarily, children are only invited to briefly add words to a teacher's response, or to echo language from the text. But children can also produce rich and complex responses to text when invited to do so.

These results bring to mind Gordon Wells' (1986) idea that most of the time we fail to exploit the full potential of language. Wells quotes Sapir to illustrate his point: "It is somewhat as though a dynamo capable of generating enough power to run an elevator were used almost exclusively to operate an electric doorbell" (Wells, 1986, p. 111). We need to activate children's potential to master decontextualized language, in order to meet the increasingly complex demands that they will encounter throughout their school years.

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